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Missions of the United States Coast Guard

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Aids to Navigation

One of the oldest missions of the Coast Guard is aids to navigation. Perhaps the best known aids to navigation are lighthouses. Although many have been converted to automatic operation, some of the existing structures were built shortly after Revolutionary times.

The Coast Guard maintains nearly 400 lighthouses and more than 13,000 minor lights. They are situated in, on or near prominent coastal points, channels and their entrances, lakes, rivers, inland waterways, dangerous areas and collectively they serve to make 40,000 miles of waterways safe for navigation.

The Coast Guard maintains more than 45,000 aids to navigation, more than half being buoys. Aids to navigation also include sophisticated large navigational buoys and off-shore towers. There are also long range electronic Aids maintained by the Coast Guard. Called LORAN-C and OMEGA, they send out radio signals to enable a ship's master to know his position within yards. To keep these aids in good condition, the Coast Guard has a fleet of ships, ranging from 180-foot ocean going tenders to 65-foot river tenders and smaller specialized boats.

Merchant Marine Safety

The Coast Guard's regulation over the safety of the United States merchant vessel fleet is one of the Service's most complex missions. Virtually from design to construction and eventually until scrap, the nation's merchant vessels are under Coast Guard regulations.

The Coast Guard approves the design of new vessels, and those involved in building ships must pass Coast Guard examinations. The Coast Guard also prescribes a wide variety of safety equipment for merchant ships—lifeboats, first aid kits, fire-fighting systems and lifesaving equipment.

Those who sail merchant ships are licensed by the Coast Guard. For serious violations, the Coast Guard may also revoke these licenses. The loading and unloading of certain types of dangerous cargo is regulated, and the vessels are continually inspected. If the ship is involved in a serious accident, it will be the Coast Guard that investigates to find out what happened and why.

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Environmental Protection

Since the first pollution laws were passed in 1899, the Coast Guard has had the responsibility of establishing and enforcing regulations dealing with marine enviromental protection.

Sophisticated techniques have been developed to prevent oil spills from grounded vessels. And, if prevention efforts are too late, new Coast Guard systems are used to minimize environmental damage and clean-up. To enforce regulations governing intentional oil discharge, for example, a method has been developed to "fingerprint" oil spills, analyze the oil and compare it with samples on all vessels known to have traversed the area during the days preceding the spill.

Other Coast Guard environmental protection efforts include regulating transportation of hazardous cargoes, such as liquefied natural gas and potentially hazardous chemicals like insecticides and herbicides. Units assigned to carry out these duties include three "strike teams"—elite groups of experts in oil pollution control, marine salvage, diving and other skills related to the marine environment. These highly mobile units and equipment can quickly deploy to sites of maritime disasters involving spills, airlifted in Coast Guard HC-130H "Hercules" transport aircraft.

Maritime Law Enforcement

In 1790, The "Coast Guard" was originally formed as "a fleet of cutters" to protect federal revenue on foreign imports. Since then, the Coast Guard has become the principal federal agency for maritime law enforcement and marine safety. In ocean operations alone, the Coast Guard annually expends an average of 4,000 cutter days and 21,000 flight hours enforcing America's various laws. These laws include customs and immigration laws, smuggling and narcotics enforcement, fisheries laws, international treaties, and even laws governing the protection of endangered maritime mammals. To handle this vast responsibility, the Coast Guard maintains a fleet of vessels ranging from 31-foot patrol utility boats to the highly sophisticated 210, 270 and 378-foot cutters.

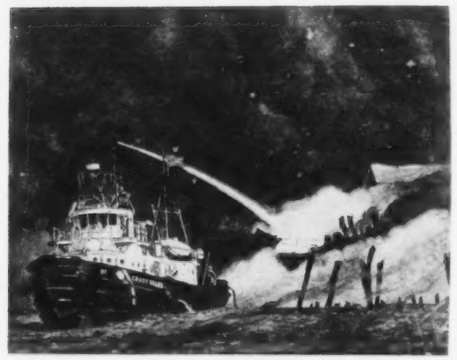
Port Safety

The Coast Guard's port safety mission is to protect vessels and waterfront facilities from damage through sabotage, subversive acts, accidents or other causes.

Port safety is handled through the Coast Guard's Marine Safety and Captain-of-the-Port offices usually in conjunction with area marine environmental safety. The responsibilities include inspecting commercial vessels for safety of equipment and cargo stowage, especially when dangerous cargo is listed on the manifest.

Port safety inspectors also check cargo facilities to ensure that safety regulations are met, both for the facility and the handling of cargo. Daily checks are made on vessel traffic in the harbor. Special transport arrangements, security zone classifications and other special authorizations for port movement are set by Port Safety offices.

Port Safety personnel produce impressive statistics: each year an average of 85,000 shore-side facilities are inspected, over 54,000 vessels are boarded, and over 2,000 "dangerous cargo" loadings supervised.



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